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Faculty Laureate Fritz Addresses New Students at Convocation

Aug-29-2007

Eastern Illinois University's [2007 Faculty Laureate Ann Fritz](#) spoke to new students at the annual Convocation ceremony Tuesday evening in the Grand Ballroom of the MLK Jr. Union. Following are her remarks:

Good evening. My thanks for the wonderful introduction from Dr. Curry; it is a privilege to participate in tonight's celebration, joined by many whom I recognize and respect as part of the fabric of EIU: former faculty laureates such as Dr. Curry, student leaders such as student body president Cole Roberts, august administrators and learned faculty of EIU, and most importantly, you.

It is a truly a special honor to be chosen to represent EIU faculty in welcoming you, the newest members of our campus community. Whether you might label yourself a freshman, transfer student, international student, non-traditional student, or some combination of these, I sincerely welcome you to EIU. You have already heard from another new member of EIU's campus community (he's been here some weeks longer than you), our university President, Dr. Perry. On behalf of faculty, it is my pleasure to warmly welcome Dr. Perry to his first (of many) convocations at EIU. It has been called to my attention that Dr. Perry is EIU's 10th sitting President, this is the 10th year of the Faculty Laureate Award at EIU, and tonight is a full moon. We probably need a conspiracy theorist to iron-out these connections, but tonight is obviously a very special night for this gathering.

Our convocation ceremony is not only our way of welcoming you to EIU but also marks the significance of your entry into a different academic landscape than you may have previously experienced, one that will transform and enrich your life. You can see by the robes and hats worn tonight that we plundered our historical wardrobe. You may wonder, where do they get this stuff? We dust off traditional academic dress when we wish to recognize and honor academic achievements (such as graduation) or to benchmark a significant moment, such as your joining this institution. We recognize that your previous accomplishments and achievements have brought you here. Welcome to you!

As this year's faculty laureate, I have been asked to make brief remarks concerning the academic experience; the role of a general, liberal education; and some secrets to success in this environment.

What will astound and excite you in your explorations at EIU? You may not yet be sure which path you will choose. And you may be surprised about the directions that your compelling interests can lead you. Take me for example: I have a longstanding fascination with insects. I am drawn to bugs, if you will pardon me, like insects to a porch light. If you were to stroll from Old Main to the Life Sciences Building with me, you might be delayed as we stopped to notice all manner of ants, flies, wasps, beetles and butterflies on this campus. As a "science-y" undergraduate, I took a general education natural history course and was thrilled to be able to study insects and spiders in college. Believe it or not, this primary interest has turned out to be the foundation of my development as a scientist, in the field of entomology, and I have spent many years now studying insects and their relatives. If you were to do an undergraduate research project with me, you might be amazed at the research questions that can be tested with insects and spiders. And, you could amuse yourself pondering such questions as, "How can Spider-Man make so much silk in a day's adventure of saving the world?" Only among entomologists would a thorough calculation be made of Spidey's protein requirements for that amount of silk; Spider-Man, it turns out, would have to eat at least an entire cow, everyday! Insects and spiders may not be your cup of tea, but something equally tantalizing is here for you to discover, and the biggest task you undertake, here, is finding the path that energizes and inspires you.

We are an institution that offers you a general, liberal arts education. A general, liberal arts education, it turns out, is a distinctly American phenomenon. General education had its birth as concerned educators in the U.S. understood the tremendous role of an educated citizenry to the future of our country. Therefore, they modified the mold of a classic European university, where students specialized early into distinct careers. Today, not only do more Americans go on to higher education than the citizenry of practically all other developed nations, but we have the idea of a liberal arts education as our own definition distinguishing an educated person. And, you might find it interesting to learn that university students in the U.S. do significantly better on general knowledge tests than their European counterparts. So, what does it mean to have a general, liberal arts education? It means that different disciplines' traditions and ways of thinking are open to you. But, a liberal arts education is not just about being exposed to different disciplines. It is also about developing and honing your ability to adapt, write, read, think analytically, communicate effectively, be creative, and interact with people from different backgrounds. You will take courses in a variety of disciplines outside of your major such as English, history, science, and art. Through your experiences, you will stretch your own ways of understanding the world, solving problems, and organizing knowledge. By joining us at EIU, you are no longer on the outside looking in, but have bravely walked through the doorway into the midst of the decision-makers, the artists, the writers, the physicists, the mathematicians, the historians – in other words, the makers and shapers of the future. You will have acquired a basis to build your knowledge in the future, and to participate in the shared decisions that are the only real foundation of a democracy.



2007 EIU Faculty Laureate Ann Fritz

The general education classes you take might fulfill a dream or a lark, or a fascination or a dare to explore your intellectual landscape to parts unknown. Of course, these classes are offered under categories so that your choices will become part of a puzzle that fits together forming a whole. My wish is that you are brave in challenging yourself with general education courses, as they can most certainly be beyond your comfort range. Think critically as if your life depends on it, because yours, ours, and our children's do, because you will shape and mold the future. There are no easy answers for issues that, by default, are now yours – and turning away from them will not work either. As we have begun to be more technologically advanced, we now know how fragile our earth is – life as we know it literally depends on our collective ability to recognize and respond to life-threatening issues. You are here because we all need each other, and we need the best of what each of us has to offer to participate and develop in a system of “shared governance” we call a democracy. Our lives will change in the future, but we can all ensure that change is for the better if we bring our collective knowledge to the common good.

Eastern Illinois University has a proud tradition of putting students' education first, and EIU is one of the best-kept secrets in Illinois. Like a restaurant off the beaten path, that has loyal diners, EIU has consistently (and perhaps too quietly) educated scores of Illinois citizens in small classes (mostly), and through unprecedented access to faculty who teach these courses. Faculty expend a great deal of time and effort to make EIU the best possible environment for learning, and one consequence of this effort is that you have opportunities for involvement, which baccalaureate students in large institutions are not able to access. For example, EIU faculty are involved in research and other creative activities in their fields. This activity keeps your professors at the forefront of knowledge in their disciplines, and this “cutting-edge” knowledge is shared with you in your courses and interactions with faculty. But it also means something else: You may choose to seek out opportunities to work with your professors. You might collaborate on an art project, or do experiments on fish in the Caribbean islands, or research local Civil War events for a publication in a history journal. Another life changing experience can come from the overseas study abroad courses EIU has to offer, where you can learn to function intelligently and thoughtfully in different cultures and climates. These are the opportunities for involvement that can change your life and your career, and are accessible to undergraduate students at EIU.

This summer, I traveled to several cities in China – a truly tremendous journey and a lifelong dream. Of course, I immediately wanted to plan the next trip! For part of the trip, a Chinese computer science student joined us to act as our interpreter. She and I roomed together, and in one of those late-night roommate conversations, I asked her about her initial feelings when she first entered her university. She explained that her strongest feelings were those of anticipation of new experiences, pressure to succeed in this new environment, and exhilaration at choices and possibilities unfolding before her. Interestingly, she was about to engage in a study abroad semester in Norway. Despite China's long, rich, cultural history, quite different from ours, I was struck by the fact that Chinese students share the same aspirations, excitement and concerns that many of you have. Here at EIU, as we read the book “A Hope in the Unseen,” it was very clear that Cedric Jennings had a lot to prove to himself, his family, and others in his life. His challenge was both private and very public, as is true for all of us.

As was true for Cedric Jennings, taking advantage of opportunities, perseverance and hard work led to a remarkable unfolding and development of his life. So, work hard, get to know what is available to you here, participate, and you will metamorphose. And, don't forget, worship the librarians. Not only will you find that Booth Library offers superb access to online resources, and is one of the most hospitable and relaxing environments on campus to study, the hard-working denizens of the library, the librarians and library staff, can truly assist you in finding information and resources for your studies.

Let me close by telling you that in biology, we have a way of understanding the complexity of the living world; it is called the “principle of emergent properties.” The principle of emergent properties means, in general, that when we study the parts of an organism, or the pieces of a biological system, we cannot necessarily predict all of the interactions and relationships that will result when all those parts or pieces are put together and functioning. It is that old adage “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Your journey here at EIU will likely have many emergent properties (some of these are enumerated as student objectives). During the time you are engaged in studies here at EIU, you will find that the whole of your experience is more than the classes you loved, the papers you labored over, the friends you made, and the graduation requirements you satisfied. I am quite convinced that you will be transformed from these weeks forward, and as your journey continues, you may not recognize the person you are today. Good night and best wishes to you!